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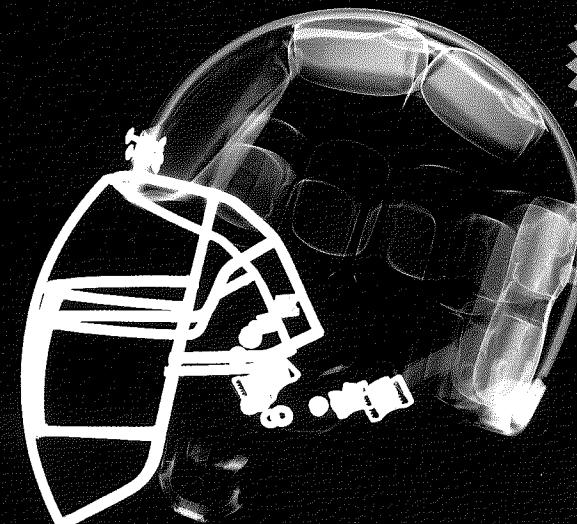
"*League of Denial* may turn out to be the most influential sports-related book of our time."

— *BOSTON GLOBE*, BEST SPORTS BOOKS OF 2013

THE NFL, CONCUSSIONS, AND THE BATTLE FOR TRUTH

LEAGUE — OF — DENIAL

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER



MARK FAINARU-WADA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GAME OF SHADOWS*

AND **STEVE FAINARU**

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

Praise for *League of Denial*

“Meticulously documented and endlessly chilling.”

—*New York Times*

“*League of Denial* may turn out to be the most influential sports-related book of our time.”

—*Boston Globe*, Best Sports Books of 2013

“The book should come with a warning label for football fans: Watching a game will never be the same after you read it . . . [Fainaru-Wada and Fainaru] ask tough questions of the NFL without taking their conclusions too far.”

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—Peter King

“Clear-eyed and devastating.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru’s book *League of Denial* should be required reading in secondary schools for all athletes. Those of us outside the lines will be wiser as well for having invested just a few hours to read it.”

—Tim Cowlishaw, *Dallas Morning News*

LEAGUE OF DENIAL

**THE NFL, CONCUSSIONS,
AND THE
BATTLE FOR TRUTH**

**MARK FAINARU-WADA
AND STEVE FAINARU**



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NEW YORK

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First Paperback Edition

To the three remarkable women in our lives—

Nicole,

Maureen,

and our mother, Ellen Gilbert

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AUTHORS' NOTE

This book benefited greatly from the work of people who joined us at different stages of the research. Sabrina Shankman, a reporter for *Frontline*, the PBS investigative news program, spent nearly a year on the project, conducting numerous interviews and gathering information on everything from the biomechanics of helmet testing to the NFL's courtship of mommy bloggers. She is a tireless, smart, and resourceful reporter and a wonderful colleague. Her work can be found throughout the book. Kevin Fixler, a recent graduate of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and a freelance sportswriter based in Denver, and Maureen Fan, the former Beijing correspondent for the *Washington Post*, also contributed essential research. We were fortunate to have such outstanding collaborators, each of whom strengthened the book in ways that are visible and others that are not.

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Roger S. Goodell, *Commissioner, 2006–*

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Greg Aiello, *Director of Communications*

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Dave Duerson (deceased), *Defensive Back, Chicago Bears, 1983–1989; New York Giants, 1990; Phoenix Cardinals, 1991–1993*

John Grimsley (deceased), *Linebacker, Houston Oilers, 1984–1990; Miami Dolphins, 1992–1993*

Merril Hoge, *Running Back, Pittsburgh Steelers, 1987–1993; Chicago Bears, 1994*

Ted Johnson, *Linebacker, New England Patriots, 1995–2004*

Terry Long (deceased), *Guard, Pittsburgh Steelers, 1984–1991*

John Mackey (deceased), *Tight End, Baltimore Colts, 1963–1971; San Diego Chargers, 1972*

Tom McHale (deceased), *Guard, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, 1987–1992; Philadelphia Eagles, 1993–1994; Miami Dolphins, 1995*

Gary Plummer, *Linebacker, San Diego Chargers, 1986–1993; San Francisco 49ers, 1994–1997*

Junior Seau (deceased), *Linebacker, San Diego Chargers, 1990–2002; Miami Dolphins, 2003–2005; New England Patriots, 2006–2009*

Justin Strzelczyk (deceased), *Guard-Tackle, Pittsburgh Steelers, 1990–1998*

Al Toon, *Wide Receiver, New York Jets, 1985–1992*

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Mike Webster (deceased), *Center, Pittsburgh Steelers, 1974–1988; Kansas City Chiefs, 1989–1990*

Steve Young, *Quarterback, Los Angeles Express (USFL), 1984–1985; Tampa Bay Buccaneers, 1985–1986; San Francisco 49ers, 1987–1999*

LEAGUE OF DENIAL

PROLOGUE

BIRD BRAINS

Behold the mighty woodpecker.

On average, it weighs about 2 ounces and can generate up to 1,000 g forces while pecking at tree limbs 12,000 times a day. Yet the woodpecker's brain remains pristine and unscathed, a fact that has intrigued researchers for decades. Nature essentially has turned the woodpecker into a shock absorber from beak to foot. The bird's uneven bill deflects much of the impact of its incessant head banging. A third interior eyelid prevents its eyeballs from popping out. The woodpecker's tongue is one of the most unusual features in nature. It extends from the back of the bird's mouth and through its right nostril, finally wrapping itself snugly around the entire crown of the head. Chinese researchers who subjected the great spotted woodpecker and the Eurasian hoopoe to super-slow-motion replay and CT scans concluded that the tongue serves as a kind of safety belt for the brain.

In the late 2000s, Julian Bailes displayed a woodpecker skull in a jar on top of his desk in Morgantown, West Virginia. Bailes was a top neurosurgeon and a former team doctor for the Pittsburgh Steelers. He incurred the wrath of the NFL when he joined a small group of researchers who concluded that football was causing brain damage in an alarming number of former players. During a closed-door meeting in 2007 that was attended by the NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell, and

200 team doctors, trainers, and players, a neurologist affiliated with the league had mocked Bailes, rolling his eyes as Bailes showed slides of diseased brain tissue collected from dead players. "I'm a man of science!" the NFL's neurologist had bellowed, implying that Bailes was not. It was an ugly scene, one of many that took place during those strange years when the National Football League went to war against science.

Every once in a while, someone would ask Bailes about the curious object on his desk. Bailes loved football—he had been an all-state linebacker in Louisiana—and even though the NFL was attacking him, he surrounded himself with artifacts of the sport: a shelf filled with old helmets of the Steelers, Cardinals, Chiefs, and Rams; deflated footballs; a panoramic photo of Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium, where he once had worked; and a signed photo of the legendary Steelers linebacker Jack Lambert, snarling and toothless. "My whole life was football," Bailes would say. He would pick up the tiny bird brain from his desk and explain that if only NFL players were built like woodpeckers, none of this would have happened.

September 28, 2002, is one of the most significant dates in the history of American sports. You won't find it in the record books.

That morning, on a stainless steel autopsy table inside the Allegheny County coroner's office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, lay the body of Mike Webster, the legendary center of the Pittsburgh Steelers. He had been stripped to his blue jeans, and his stomach had been injected with embalming fluid. Even in death, Webster looked formidable, with a muscular thickness from head to foot, a body that seemed designed to absorb and mete out punishment. But on closer inspection, it was a body that showed horrific signs of wear. Late in Webster's life, his personal physician had noticed that the skin on his forehead had become "fixed to his scalp," a shelf of scar tissue built up over 17 years of pro football. Odd bulges protruded from his back, varicose veins spidered down his legs, and deep cracks ran along the bottoms of his feet. His fingers were thick and crooked like splayed branches. Webster's ex-wife, peering into his casket, had noticed that his fingers remained curled so that "it looked like he was still holding a football." Webster was 50 years old when he died, but a lot of people thought he looked 70.

Five years earlier, when Webster was inducted into the Hall of Fame, his old quarterback, Terry Bradshaw, introduced him as "the best center that's ever played the game, the best to ever put his hands down on a football." Bradshaw, bald except for a fringe of blond hair, looking like a TV evangelist in his gold Hall of Fame sport coat, gazed up to the gray skies and cried: "One more time, let me put my hands under Mike Webster's butt!" Webster, looking sheepish and befuddled, bent over in his khakis and hiked the ball to Bradshaw as the crowd roared. That was in 1997. Webster was already a very sick man. How sick, only a few people knew. Steelers fans had heard some of the stories: that Webster was broke and jobless and living in his truck, that his body was falling apart, that he was seeing a psychiatrist. The reality was far worse: Webster, a kind, thoughtful man during his playing days—many imagined he would go on to a successful career in coaching or perhaps broadcasting, like Bradshaw—had been transformed into a completely different person.

Webster had accumulated an arsenal of weapons that included a Sig Sauer P226 semiautomatic pistol, an AR-15 semiautomatic assault rifle, and a .357 Magnum revolver. He talked frequently about killing NFL officials, including Steelers executives and members of the league's disability board, whom he blamed for his financial troubles. Webster had become addicted to Ritalin, a stimulant normally prescribed to children with attention-deficit disorder, finding that it was the only thing that got him through the day.

Webster, more than anyone, knew how sick he was, and he believed his illness was connected to the game to which he had given his life. Webster once went six seasons without missing a single offensive play; later, when asked by a doctor if he had ever been involved in a car crash, he replied: "Oh, probably about 25,000 times or so." He read constantly, even during the worst of his illness, and he would pore over literature on head trauma and brain disease, putting exclamation points in the margins and circling terms that he thought applied to him, such as "ice pick headache" and "disinhibition" and "dysfluency." He wrapped duct tape around his crooked fingers so that he could grasp a pen to write thousands of letters—some ranting and paranoid, some desperate, some incomprehensible—on any scrap of paper he could find. One read:

What Do I do, I am over fucking overwhelmed . . . what to Do . . . Have NO way Be able to Help my Kids Everyone other Family Dependents and Keep Them Healthy Safe. . . Maybe me worthless piece of crap but can NOT Let That Get to me have to Keep Trying Keep Work at all this but How Do I Do anything Now?

As Webster lay dead inside the coroner's office that September morning, a silver Mercedes-Benz turned into the back parking lot. A small, dapper forensic pathologist named Bennet Omalu climbed out. It was a mild fall day in Pittsburgh, not yet cold, the start of another football season. Outside the building, TV trucks and reporters had gathered with the news that "Iron Mike" Webster, the indestructible force of four Super Bowl champions, the center of gravity of the Steeler dynasty—"our strength," Bradshaw had called him—was inside on a slab.

Omalu was on call to perform autopsies that Saturday because he was the most junior pathologist in the office. He had been out clubbing the night before.

"What's going on?" he asked his colleagues.

"It's Mike Webster. His body is in there," one of them whispered.

"Who is Mike Webster?" asked Omalu.

Over the last year or so, people sometimes have asked us: Is ESPN really going to let you write this book?

It is an interesting question. We are employees of the company once known as the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network but now commonly identified by its initials—a media empire that operates seven 24-hour sports channels, a website that attracts more than 37 million unique visitors every month, a radio network of more than 400 stations, and numerous other sports-related enterprises. The centerpiece of ESPN's empire is its lucrative relationship with the National Football League. The network pays the NFL—and, by extension, its 32 franchises—\$1.9 billion per year to broadcast *Monday Night Football*. That's \$112 million per game, nearly the average budget for the Harry Potter films.

ESPN's bet on the NFL is based on its own market research, which distinguishes the average sports fan from what the network likes to call

"avids"—people who follow their sports regularly and crave information about them the way they crave food. According to ESPN's internal data, by 2012 there were 85 million NFL avids—more than a quarter of the nation. The network has been able to pinpoint almost the exact moment when pro football permanently surpassed baseball as America's pastime: the fall of 1994, when, not coincidentally, a seven-month strike wiped out the World Series. In some major cities today, having a pro football team is a higher priority than providing basic services. The city of Oakland and Alameda County, for example, shell out over \$30 million each year to support the Raiders; by 2012, Oakland, with one of the worst crime rates in the nation, had cut 200 police officers to save money.

The national obsession with football, which blew right through the recession, has turned the NFL into the richest and most powerful sports league in the nation and a ubiquitous presence in our lives. ESPN's research has discovered that for the first time, more people prefer watching games on television to attending them. The NFL is broadcast over five networks—including its own—and brings in annual rights fees of \$5 billion. In the fall of 2012, 23 of the 25 top-rated shows on TV were NFL games. Once, when the league moved a game from Sunday to Tuesday because of a blizzard, a spokesman predicted that the ratings would be unaffected because the NFL is the "ultimate reality show" and impervious even to acts of God.

The players—the larger-than-life men on whom this \$10 billion industry was built—participate in what the historian and former Kansas City Chiefs offensive lineman Michael Oriard has described as "contact ballet." The violence, of course, has always been a big part of football's appeal, but it's cinematic and filtered, almost like a war movie. The destructive force behind the sport was seldom considered. In 2004, a football-loving physicist at the University of Nebraska named Tim Gay set out to calculate the magnitude of a Dick Butkus hit. Applying Newton's second law of motion, he calculated that Butkus, who played at 245 pounds (about 30 pounds lighter than many linebackers today), generated 1,150 pounds of force when slamming into a running back of approximately the same size. "That's the weight of a small adult killer whale!" Gay added helpfully. But rarely did fans dwell on the implications for the men on either side of that transaction.

And then, one Saturday morning in 2002, an obscure forensic pathologist cut open Mike Webster's skull.

That decision—and its consequences, growing by the day—is the subject of this book. There has never been anything like it in the history of sports: a public health crisis that emerged from the playing fields of our twenty-first-century pastime. A small group of research scientists put football under a microscope—literally. What they found was not the obvious, as many people later would claim. We all knew that football was violent and dangerous, that one hit could break your neck or even kill you. No, what the researchers were saying was that the essence of football—the unavoidable head banging that occurs on every play, like a woodpecker jackhammering at a tree—can unleash a cascading series of neurological events that in the end strangles your brain, leaving you unrecognizable.

The researchers who made this discovery—you could count them on one hand—thought NFL executives would embrace their findings, if only to make their product safer. That is not what happened. Instead, the league used its economic, political, and media power to attack pioneering research and try to replace it with its own. Its resources, of course, were considerable. For years, the NFL would co-opt an influential medical journal whose editor in chief was a consultant to the New York Giants. The league used that journal, which some researchers would come to ridicule as “the Journal of No NFL Concussions,” to publish an unprecedented series of papers, several of which were rejected by peer reviewers and editors and later disavowed even by some of their own authors. The papers portrayed NFL players as superhuman and impervious to brain damage. They included such eye-popping assertions as “Professional football players do not sustain frequent repetitive blows to the brain on a regular basis.” The NFL’s flawed research was shaped by a web of conflicting interests. Riddell, the league’s official helmet maker, used the research to create and successfully market a helmet it claimed significantly reduced concussions in children—a claim that triggered an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission, which concluded it was false.

The NFL’s strategy seemed not unlike that of another powerful industry, the tobacco industry, which had responded to its own existential threat by underwriting questionable science through the creation of its own scientific research council and trying to silence anyone who

contradicted it. There are many differences, as we shall see, but one is that football’s health crisis featured not millions of anonymous victims but very public figures whose grotesque demises seemed almost impossible to reconcile with their personas. One eight-year NFL veteran would kill himself by drinking antifreeze. Another prominent player would crash his Ford pickup into a tanker truck while leading police on a high-speed chase. Two players, Dave Duerson and Junior Seau, would fire handguns into their chests; Seau, one of the finest linebackers to play the game, used a .357 Magnum that his family didn’t know he owned to shoot himself in a guest room of his beach house filled with the memorabilia of a 20-year career. As the crisis grew, the brains of those famous players became valuable scientific commodities. A macabre race ensued among researchers to harvest and study them—even while the bodies were still warm. Minutes after Seau’s body was carted out of his house, his oldest son, Tyler, began getting calls seeking his father’s brain.

The story is far from over. As this book was being written, nearly 6,000 retired players and their families were suing the league and Riddell for negligence and fraud. Their argument was that the NFL had “propagated its own industry-funded and falsified research” to conceal the link between football and brain damage. One week before the start of the 2013 season, the NFL settled the case—agreeing to pay the players \$765 million, plus an expected \$200 million in legal fees. The NFL did not admit wrongdoing, but the settlement hardly resolved the question at the core of the league’s concussion crisis: How dangerous is football to one’s brain? Unlike smoking, there was no scientific consensus about the risks of playing football. One neurosurgeon connected to the NFL said children were more likely to sustain a brain injury riding a bike or falling down. Another neurosurgeon, also connected to the league, called for abolishing tackle football entirely for children younger than 14.

The prevalence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)—the name for the insidious disease found in the brains of Seau, Duerson, and the others—is also unknown. The leading expert on the subject is a blond Green Bay Packers fan named Ann McKee, who works out of a redbrick building at the Department of Veterans Affairs outside Boston in an office cluttered with football helmets, bobblehead dolls, and a Packers cheesehead resting atop a plastic heart. In a nearby building,

the largest collection of NFL brains is stored in a freezer at -80 degrees Celsius.

By the fall of 2012, McKee had examined the brains of 34 former NFL players. Thirty-three had CTE. We asked her what percentage of NFL players probably had it.

The following exchange ensued:

McKee: I don't think everybody has it, but I think it's going to be a shockingly high percentage.

Question: If you believe that there is a shockingly high number of football players who are bound to suffer from it, how can we even justify having people play professional football?

McKee: Well, I think, you know . . . how come I just don't say, "Let's ban football immediately"?

Question: Yeah.

McKee: I think I would lose my audience.

That brings us back to the question: What's in it for ESPN to support this book? Why would the network that stages the rough equivalent of a Harry Potter movie every week let us dig into a subject that examines the darkest underside of the network's biggest product.

ESPN—itself worth an estimated \$40 billion—subsists on sports information, any sports information, much the way the *Wall Street Journal* and CNBC subsist on financial information. "The value of the NFL to us is the ubiquity of the sport across all our platforms all the time," John Skipper, now ESPN's president, explained to the *New York Times* when asked about the staggering contract in 2011. "It's just stupendous for us. It's daily product—we don't have a day without the NFL."

From its modest beginnings, journalism has been part of ESPN's DNA. We work out of a cubbyhole of the empire, an investigative reporting unit with the unusual mandate to investigate the very products that ESPN is selling. It is, in many respects, a journalistic minefield. But for a network that traffics in sports information, one piece of sports information is in particularly high demand these days: Is football killing its players?

Do we really want to know?

"**Y**ou mean that guy who was on TV?" Bennet Omalu asked his colleagues as he arrived at the coroner's office.

Omalu had seen the reports of Webster's death, the stories about his life unraveling over the final few years. Omalu didn't think much about it. He had never attended a football game. He found the sport brutal and strange, "extraterrestrials running around a large field and tackling one another; sometimes in a ferocious manner."

Omalu himself was something of an alien. At that moment, his visa had lapsed, and he was in the process of renewing it to stay in the United States. He was a small man, about 5-feet-6 and black, with a voice that went up several octaves when he was excited, which was often, and a perfectly round head, like a 16-inch softball. Omalu had been born in the middle of Nigeria's civil war in the short-lived secessionist nation of Biafra. He came to the United States in 1994 and immediately began collecting degrees. He obtained his medical license in Indiana and Pennsylvania (later he would add California and Hawaii); an MBA; a master's degree in public health; and board certifications in anatomic pathology, clinical pathology, forensic pathology, neuropathology, and medical management.

Omalu's specialty was the science of death.

A deeply spiritual man, he believed, in fact, that he could talk to the dead. Before dissecting his subjects—murder victims, people who had died of unknown or suspicious causes—he carried on internal conversations with the people laid out before him, imploring the dead to help him figure out what had caused their demise.

Now he talked to Webster.

"Mike, you need to help me. I know there's something wrong, but you need to help me tell the world what happened to you."

Omalu used a scalpel to make a Y-shaped incision along the length of Webster's torso. He peeled back Webster's abdomen, which was thick and taut from the embalming fluid. He removed Webster's rib cage with a small oscillating saw. He inspected the internal organs *in situ* and then removed them one by one. He weighed the organs—the liver, the pancreas, the heart—on a scale and then sliced them into pieces on a plastic cutting board before placing them in jars.

The assistant then propped up the back of Webster's head on a rubber tee. She made incisions across the scalp and over the ears. She pushed the rough skin of Webster's forehead over his eyes and pulled back his scalp to reveal the top of his head. To see the skull exposed is to understand the preciousness of its contents, the brain's utter indispensability to who we are. The brain sits inside a quarter-inch-thick vault of bony plates, in a bath of cerebrospinal fluid. It is not easy to remove. The autopsy suite filled with the high-pitched whine of the circular saw as bone dust rose from Webster's head.

For all the punishment Webster's body had absorbed, his brain looked normal. It had no visible bruises or aneurysms within its soft gray folds. In its natural state, the brain is almost gelatinous; to examine it further would require soaking it for weeks in a tub of formaldehyde and water, a process known as fixing. The process stiffens the brain until it can be sliced like pound cake and then shaved into slivers to be viewed under a microscope.

But that wouldn't be necessary here. The official cause of Webster's death was "acute myocardial infarction"—a heart attack. The assistant began to gather Webster's brain with his other organs, to be placed back inside his body.

Omalu paused. The death certificate had noted somewhat mysteriously that Webster suffered from "depression secondary to postconcussion syndrome." Omalu thought about the reports he had seen on television that morning about Webster's erratic behavior. He thought about a previous patient, a battered woman whose autopsy had shown signs of brain disease. "It was a decision that you just make in the spur of the moment," he later would say.

"Fix the brain," he ordered.

The assistant balked. Webster's brain was normal, wasn't it? He had died of a heart attack.

"Fix the brain," Omalu said, this time more firmly.

PART ONE

DISCOVERY

THE NUTCRACKER

On Monday morning, July 15, 1974, Mike Webster took the field for the first time as a Pittsburgh Steeler. It was the opening day of training camp. Not the official opening—that had taken place the day before, with routine meetings, room assignments, and the distribution of playbooks and equipment. This was the real opening of camp, when Chuck Noll and his coaching staff would toss out “the raw meat to find who’s hungriest.” Thousands of fans made the pilgrimage out to Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, about an hour east of Pittsburgh. The cars snaked down Route 30 and parked in a cornfield, the faithful walking the last mile to the tiny Benedictine school.

They had turned out not only for practice but for one particular drill, a bloody annual rite so notorious that it had two names. Noll, always bland and officious, used its more decorous name: the Oklahoma drill, said to derive from its origins at the University of Oklahoma under Bud Wilkinson. But others had a more descriptive name that seemed closer to its essence: the Nutcracker. Its champions included Vince Lombardi, who viewed it as nothing less than a test of manhood. The players dreaded it. Future generations would look back and cringe at the ritual, almost a form of human cockfighting, thinking about the inevitable toll, but at the time it was a staple for all teams at all levels, as much a sign that football was back as the turning of the leaves.

The rules of the Nutcracker were basic: An offensive player lined up

against a defensive player. They stood between two tackling dummies set three yards apart, creating a gauntlet. A quarterback and a running back lined up behind the offensive player. At the whistle, the quarterback handed the ball to the running back, who followed the blocker and tried to get past the defender. But the quarterback and the running back were essentially props. The Nutcracker was about the collision, two opposing forces coming together, rams knocking heads. It was about setting a tone. New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick believed the Nutcracker answered some of football's most fundamental questions: "Who is a man? Who's tough? Who's going to hit somebody?"

Noll turned it into a public spectacle. The fans, watching from a hill, cheered it on like a blood sport, a modern-day gladiatorial battle. The players joined in, forming a ring around the pit and roaring their allegiances—offense or defense. The assistant coaches were ringleaders, selecting the players for combat. At one point in the 1970s, the Steelers had two coaches, Rollie Dotsch, on offense, and George Perles, on defense, who were both Michigan State grads. Perles in particular "was out of his fucking mind, and they would whip the players into a frenzy," said Stan Savran, a veteran Pittsburgh broadcaster. The two coaches, themselves in a lather, sometimes came to blows, and "even though you thought it was probably fake, you were so into the emotion of it," said Jon Kolb, the longtime Steelers tackle. "I mean, you're talking about guys with an inordinate amount of testosterone." Art Rooney Jr., the team's scouting director, said the Nutcracker was about "huffing, puffing, bleeding, farting." Once, as the team was about to run the drill, he asked a Steelers assistant, "Is this guy tough?" "Tough?" the coach replied. "He's a fighter, a fucker, a wild horseback rider."

Webster, the Steelers' fifth-round draft pick, found himself paired off against another rookie, linebacker Jack Lambert, who had been drafted in the second round. Few, if any, would have bet on Webster. Lambert was tall and lean, 215 pounds, fairly light for a linebacker. He had played at a midlevel school, Kent State, arriving one year after the protest shootings, when there was some doubt whether football, President Nixon's sport, would even survive on campus. But he was quick, tough, and smart—an intimidator and a trash-talker. "You think I'm mean, you should see Lambert," Joe Greene would later say. "He's so

mean he doesn't even like himself." Lambert literally had fangs: He had lost four upper teeth playing high school basketball and would remove his bridge for football, enhancing his image of menace. Lambert's legend at Kent State included a story in which the star quarterback broke a team rule and would have to miss a game unless he accepted his punishment: running, rolling, and then crawling 100 times across the length of the field. The quarterback initially balked.

"Look, asshole," Lambert told him. "Do the drill. I'll do it with you. It may be tough, but not as tough as it's going to be if you don't do it or don't finish it. Because I'll kill you."

Upon being drafted by the Steelers, Lambert informed reporters, "I get satisfaction out of hitting a guy and seeing him lay there for a while." He confidently predicted that he would find a regular spot on a team that already had two All-Pro linebackers: Andy Russell and Jack Ham. Phil Musick, then the beat writer for the *Pittsburgh Press*, was already referring to Lambert as the Nureyev of linebackers.

Webster, in contrast, was small and slow, an obscure farm kid from the northernmost edge of the country. Rooney, the scouting director, had fallen in love with Webster's game films from Wisconsin, but even he had to admit that Webster was a reach—even as a fifth-rounder. The sense was that he might hook on as a special-teams player. The Steelers had begun to experiment with a computer for scouting, and the message the computer spit out was clear: You can't win a championship with a center as small and as slow as Mike Webster. Musick was less effusive about the Steelers' fifth-round pick than he'd been about Lambert: "In the fifth round they got a center—Wisconsin's Mike Webster—which they need primarily to snap the ball in training camp." Webster himself knew the odds. He had told his new wife to stay behind in Madison in case he didn't make the team.

It was a clear day, the temperature climbing toward the mid-eighties; back then, the punishing camp began in the middle of the sweltering summer and lasted all the way till fall. Webster squatted low. Lambert, a few feet away, bent down in a three-point stance. There was the whistle and then the explosion: Webster blasting his helmet into Lambert's chest and head, his stumpy legs churning and churning, driving Lambert first up and then back—all the way into the

ground, some recalled. The crowd roared and the offense roared, and the running back easily slid past. Lambert was beaten, "tattooed," as Musick put it. They ran the play back with the same outcome: Jack Lambert destroyed. The whole thing had taken a few seconds, but it was a brief glimpse into the Steelers' future. The Nutcracker was a drill that rewarded leverage and technique and relentlessness. It was *mano a mano*, a test of brute strength and sheer will, the same battle that takes place at the line of scrimmage on every down. Lambert, of course, was a future Hall of Famer, one of the best linebackers the game would produce, but his speed and agility were of little use to him here. He was in Webster's territory.

For years to come, it was always the same matchup when the Steelers opened camp: Lambert versus Webster. "I don't remember Lambert ever making a tackle, not in the seven years I was there," said Robin Cole, a linebacker who joined the team a few years later. "He was at a disadvantage. It really wasn't fair."

Jack Lambert didn't know—would never really know—the true nature of the force that had hit him.

The story of escape—from poverty, from persecution, from violence—is timeless in American sports. But rarely has the urge to escape—and the fear of being sent back—so completely shaped an athlete as it did Mike Webster. Few Steelers would know the full extent of it, but Jon Kolb, one of Webster's best friends, got a glimpse one morning while they were driving to practice at Three Rivers Stadium. Webster and Kolb were part of the Steelers' Bible study group, and as they drove, Webster began to reflect on the "depravity" of his childhood, his shattered family, his relationship with God. Kolb would spend years with Webster on and off the field, but he never forgot the emotion of the moment, during which Webster quoted 1 Timothy 1:15: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

"We were coming down Interstate 79 and heading north toward the stadium and just coming down that hill before you get to the exit; I remember exactly where we were because it was so impactful," Kolb

recalled. "There were two things that he was talking about. One, how grateful he was for God's love. But the other thing is how he really saw himself."

Years later, after examining Webster, a West Virginia clinical psychologist would write: "He indicated that he essentially had no childhood." That wasn't completely true. Later, Webster would recount many fond memories of sports, of hunting and fishing with his siblings and his friends, of working on his family's potato farm, but it was a reflection of how Webster saw himself and the long road he had traveled. Asked what drove his son so maniacally to succeed, Bill Webster said, "I don't know; maybe he just wanted to get away from it all."

Webster was born in 1952 in Tomahawk, Wisconsin, in the heart of the Northwoods, a tourist destination on the Wisconsin River where people hunt quail and deer and fish for musky, walleye, and largemouth bass. He was the second of five children: three boys and two girls. His parents met at a local bar called Tower Hill and soon afterward eloped to Michigan. "We had five kids before we even knew what was causing them," said Bill.

For a child, it could have been idyllic. Webster was raised on a farm situated in an enchanted forest of sweet-smelling timber and folklore. The name of his high school football team was the Hodags, a mythical horned creature said to roam the Northwoods. But the reality of Webster's early life was chaos, poverty, and shame. Bill Webster was a potato farmer and a local hell-raiser, a harsh disciplinarian who was quick to anger, quick to grab a belt to punish his kids. Mike Webster later told his son Colin that his father had beaten him "with sticks, switches, belts until he was black and blue." Bill Webster's own family history was riddled with turmoil and mental illness, including a brother who committed suicide. Webster's mother had mental illness on her side of the family and eventually would have a nervous breakdown. A doctor later reported that among Webster's four siblings, "all have had manic depressive illnesses, one requiring shock therapy and one who has had several suicide attempts." His youngest brother, Joey, would spend much of his life in prison for a variety of crimes; in 1978, Webster's fourth year in the NFL, Joey was convicted in Michigan on

charges of bank robbery and illegal possession of firearms and sent to federal prison for 15 years.

Webster later told doctors that both of his parents were alcoholics. "My mom used to get scared and take off running with us five kids," said Reid Webster, Mike's older brother by a year, who also battled depression.

When she and her husband fought, Betty Webster would take her five kids to a motel or to her mother's house or the neighbors' houses until the storm had passed. Betty and Bill divorced in 1962, when Mike was 10. Both of his parents would remarry twice.

When Mike and Reid were old enough for high school, the two boys returned to their dad's potato farm to live with him, his new wife, and her two children. The farm, about four miles square, was in Harshaw, an unincorporated hamlet of scattered farms and dilapidated houses. On weekends and in the summers, Mike and Reid worked with their dad. They drove the tractor, sprayed the potatoes with pesticides, irrigated the soil, and harvested the potato crop in the fall. Mike and Reid would each grab one end of the 100-pound potato sacks and heave them onto trucks. By the time he reached high school, Mike could easily lift the bags by himself.

The Websters had a small black-and-white television, and when Mike was little, he announced to his father that he intended to play for the Green Bay Packers; he only needed to get big and strong. From that moment, sports became Mike's main outlet. When he and his brother finished their chores, they often played one-on-one tackle football in a hay field. As the boys grew older, the games got rougher. One afternoon before Mike's freshman year at Rhinelander High School, Reid chopped his younger brother at the knees. Mike flipped over backward and broke his wrist in two places. He had intended to play football that year, but his season was over before it started.

A few weeks later, Mike was standing on the grass in his cast, staring out at the football field. One of the players, Billy Makris, was running late for practice when he noticed Webster, stocky and blond, about 5-feet-10, big for a freshman.

"You playing football?" Makris asked.

"I can't. I broke my arm," Webster said.

It was just a fleeting image: a teenager staring longingly at an empty football field. But Makris never forgot it: "The sadness in his eyes, that's the best way to explain it, sadness in his eyes that he wasn't playing." Makris and Webster became best friends. Football, Makris believed, was Webster's refuge from his gothic childhood, almost a matter of survival.

Once Webster healed, he poured all his energy into training. To his coaches and teammates, it became clear that he was different. More than dedication, there was a kind of desperation in the way he prepared, as if he feared that the slightest letdown would lead to failure. By then, Bill Webster, already living on the margins, had moved from potato farming into a business digging for water wells. That meant more back-breaking labor for his sons, who at times were required to lift a 200-pound steel casing, slide it over the drill bar, lock it in place, and drive the casing into the earth.

Webster's only consolation was that he was able to salvage parts from the well business and use them for his training. An old piece of pipe became a weight bar. Water buckets were filled up and used as weights. Webster's weight bench was a piece of plywood resting atop two cinder blocks. By his senior year, he was lifting twice a day and wearing out the dirt roads around Bill's property.

Mike was turning himself into a small truck. It wasn't that he was so tall or imposing—6 feet, just over 200 pounds at the time of his graduation. But he was chiseled, fairly bulging out of his skin. He had large hands, "like a St. Bernard pup," said Makris. He wasn't yet an elite athlete, but what stood out was his intensity—his refusal to quit. Another injury like the one that had put him out his freshman year became unthinkable. When Webster broke his arm again, he had it fitted with an inflatable cast. Makris watched in awe as Webster blew up the cast on the sideline like a pool toy, then took his broken arm back out onto the field.

Webster was recruited to play at the University of Wisconsin. It was there that he began his transformation into "Iron Mike," the force so familiar to a generation of football fans. He anchored the Badgers' offensive line and became even more obsessive about his training. On the field, Webster adopted the habit of sprinting out of the huddle. At

first, his teammates thought he was showboating, but they soon realized it was part of the same relentless package.

By his senior year, Webster was team captain and the best center in the Big Ten. He also got married. His new wife, Pam, worked in the Badgers' ticket office. Her upbringing was everything Webster's was not. She had grown up in Lodi, a small town 25 miles north of Madison, in a stable family of seven brothers and sisters. Her father drove the school bus that shuttled local sports teams to their games and worked in the heating and sheet-metal business. Her mother was a nurse. Her family led a typical Wisconsin life: "hunting, brats, and the Packers."

Pam found Mike strangely endearing. He was socially awkward and could barely dress himself, his shirts mismatched and ill fitting. Even his sense of humor seemed slightly off; he meant well but was prone to saying and doing the wrong thing. But unlike other athletes she had been around, he was a gentle soul, polite and soft-spoken, and seemed entirely unimpressed with himself. "Mike had just a really kind heart," she said. He didn't tell her much about his family, but she sensed he was the caretaker for not only his brothers and his sisters but also his mother.

"I think there was a part of him that seemed wounded to me—like his soul—that just reached out to me," she said.

Webster was part of perhaps the greatest single draft by a team in NFL history. In 1974, the Steelers took USC wide receiver Lynn Swann in the first round, Lambert in the second, Alabama A&M receiver John Stallworth in the fourth, and Webster in the fifth. All four were future Hall of Famers. Between 1969, Noll's first season as head coach, and 1974, the Steelers drafted 11 Hall of Famers, the foundation of one of the NFL's great dynasties.

Webster was the biggest long shot of them all. There were those like Rooney Jr., the scouting director and son of the Steelers' patriarch, who admired Webster. At the Senior Bowl that year, Webster had manhandled a big Tennessee State middle linebacker named Waymond Bryant, whom the Bears took with the fourth overall pick. The more film the Steelers watched, the more they were intrigued. "You gotta see this Webster," Dick Haley, the team's director of player personnel, told Rooney. "He hits like Rocky Marciano." Webster's technique seemed flawless:

He had a knack for smashing his head like a sledgehammer underneath an opposing lineman's chin, then controlling the bigger man by using his leverage. He had surprisingly quick feet, stuffing one oncoming pass rusher and then gliding over to pick up another.

But there was the lingering issue of his size. He was listed at 6 feet, 2½ inches, 225 pounds, but no one believed that. He was—maybe—6-feet-1, 215. Some people had thought Webster wouldn't be drafted at all and the Steelers could pick him up as a free agent.

Webster did make the team, benefiting from a players strike that allowed him to get a long look from the Steelers coaches. He played mostly as a backup to Ray Mansfield, a beloved veteran center known as "the Old Ranger." Webster's rookie year culminated with the Steelers winning the first Super Bowl in the team's history.

As they packed up for the year, Ralph Berlin, the team's longtime trainer, ran into Webster and asked him what he had planned for the off-season.

"I'm gonna go home and get bigger," Webster told him. "You can't play in this league where I am."

When Webster returned the next season, Berlin was stunned. Webster now weighed between 250 and 260 pounds, he recalled.

By then, Webster's dedication to his training had become so maniacal that in hindsight, his closest friends wondered if it wasn't a sign of insecurity so profound that it was almost a sickness. On most days, Webster could be found in the basement of a Pittsburgh steak house, the Red Bull Inn in McMurray, a suburb south of the city. Jon Kolb had gotten to know the manager, a power-lifting fanatic named Lou Curtinga, who had turned the restaurant's boiler room into a gym. It was a lifter's dungeon, windowless and stifling, the air thick with the smell of sweat and athletic tape. Kolb recruited Webster and several other Steelers into what he called the 500 Club—players who could bench-press 500 pounds. The Red Bull Inn became Webster's second home, so central to his life that he and Pam moved closer to McMurray to cut down on his "commute."

Webster often brought his training home with him. In the winter, he would head out into the knee-deep snow with a barbell behind his head and do lunges. When the snow thawed, he put on shoulder pads

and a helmet and hammered against a blocking sled he kept in his yard. Craig Wolfley, a Steelers offensive lineman, pulled up at Webster's house early one morning to find Webster "in a helmet, shoulder pads, and spikes, pushing a sled across the front yard. *Six-thirty in the morning!* I said, 'Webby, do you know how crazy this looks?'" Wolfley joked that Webster should hook up the blocking sled to a lawn mower to kill two birds with one stone. Webster pounded his blocking sled so often, it carved a trench in the yard. Sometimes his youngest son, Garrett, hopped on for the ride.

Webster's training regimen included anabolic steroids. Decades later, this would still be a matter of debate in some circles, but the evidence was conclusive. Most notable was Webster's own admission: At least two reports in his lengthy medical file contain references to steroids. In 1993, less than three years after Webster retired, a Pittsburgh doctor reported: "He took anabolic steroids for a very short time when he was in his twenties." Another report in 1993, based on a doctor's conversation with Webster, asserted that he "only rarely experimented with steroid use" during his playing career. Those reports contradicted Webster's repeated public denials and almost certainly understated the extent of steroid use.

Webster's involvement with performance-enhancing drugs coincided with their emergence in the NFL, which didn't officially ban steroids until 1983. At least two of Webster's teammates, running back Rocky Bleier and guard Steve Courson, later admitted using steroids while they were legal. Courson, who was killed in 2005 when a tree fell on him while he was cutting it down, asserted "unequivocally" in his 1991 autobiography, *False Glory: Steelers and Steroids*, that 75 percent of his teammates on the offensive line used steroids. Bleier, in an interview, said he also saw Webster take amphetamines before and during games and wondered if his drug use later affected him. "I mean, the question with Mike has always been, the effect of steroid use on his body—did this have an effect or not—and then taking amphetamines during the game," Bleier said. "It was all legal stuff at the time, but there was still a stigma."

In truth, Webster stopped at nothing to transform himself from a high school lineman playing in the obscurity of the Wisconsin Northwoods into perhaps the finest center in history. He ingested something called spirulina—a blue-green algae taken by humans but also used as

a feed supplement in the fish and poultry industries. He took desiccated liver tablets, brewer's yeast, royal honey. Colin said his father toted around a bag containing some 20 different pills. One of the side effects of this amalgam of pills and potions was flatulence, which was known to firebomb the Steelers' huddle. "Webby, was that you?" Terry Bradshaw would shout at his center.

By 1976, Webster was nearly 270 pounds. He had increased his body weight by roughly 25 percent, almost all of it muscle.

By 1980, he was literally the strongest man in the game. That year, CBS staged a made-for-TV event called "The Strongest Man in Football." Eight of the game's giants met for a weight-lifting showdown inside Auburn's Memorial Coliseum. The Red Bull Inn tandem dominated the event. Webster, listed at 267 pounds, edged out Kolb for the \$10,000 first prize. Webster opened the competition by lifting 275 pounds over his head 12 times, struggling only at the finish. He clinched his victory in the bench press, pumping 350 pounds 15 times—over 2½ tons in one set. Kolb could muster only 11.

Webster "had arms like legs," Steve Courson would say, "and legs like people."

Between 1974 and 1980, the period in which the Steelers won four Super Bowls, Webster appeared in every game. To his teammates and his close friends, he was always "Webby," a nickname that seemed to fit his good-natured personality. Webster was slightly goofy, a bit of an odd duck, a locker room prankster. He left mousetraps in his teammates' lockers and rigged weights so that they stuck to the floor. During one Steelers blowout, Bradshaw walked up to the line, reached under the center, and then jumped back in horror. Webby had slit open his pants, and when Bradshaw reached down, he found himself holding his center's balls.

Webster was a conspiracy theorist who liked to regale teammates with a weekly news summary they called "Webby's Gloom and Doom Report." "Anything that was crazy, like the guy that got killed at the Indianapolis 500 when the tire went flying up 43 rows, that would freak him out," said his close friend the tackle Tunch Ilkin. A John Wayne fanatic, Webster wore cowboy boots and jeans to formal dinners and

recited dialogue from *McLintock!* ("I've got a touch of hangover, bureaucrat. Don't push me.") on the field while the Steelers stretched.

To fans, Webster was simply Iron Mike. As much as superstars like Bradshaw, Lambert, Lynn Swann, Franco Harris, and Mean Joe Greene would come to define the Steelers of the 1970s, no player better represented the synergy between the city and the team.

Part of it was the times. As the steel industry collapsed, Pittsburgh was being depopulated, going from the twelfth largest city in the country to the thirtieth. An estimated 30,000 steelworkers were laid off. But Webster was indestructible. "If you wanted to see a guy who represented the city of Pittsburgh, with no fancy frills, where people just go to work and do your job, that was Mike," said Bob Stage, who for years piloted the Steelers' plane and became close with Webster. Fans hung a sign over the mezzanine at Three Rivers; it depicted a bulging biceps with Webster's number, 52.

In fact, Webster was as terrified of losing his job as everyone else in the city. "Obviously he was tough, but as I got to know Mike more and more, I realized how scared he was," said Stage. "It didn't matter if he was All-Pro every year. That was never a comfort to Mike. He was such a gentleman, such a nice person, but at the height of his career, I felt that he never really enjoyed his success." In Pittsburgh, Webster built the stable family life he had never had as a child. He and Pam had four children: two boys and two girls. They lived in a gray-and-white two-story colonial outside the city. In the morning, the kids clambered out of bed to the smell of their father's freshly baked bread. "He was like a big superhero," said his daughter Brooke, the oldest of his children, "and I was a daddy's girl." One winter, Daddy came back from the Pro Bowl bearing pineapples and grass skirts and held a luau for her second-grade class. Yet Pam agreed that her husband was never totally happy. "That was so sad for me," she said. "You know, he just never felt like happy down to your toes."

Asked what motivated Webster, one of his former teammates replied: "Total fear."

By 1978, Webster was the best center in the NFL. From that year forward, he would make the Pro Bowl eight straight seasons. If off the field he was a bit awkward, on the field Webster was totally in his

element. Before the snap, the center is responsible for making the line calls, adjusting blocking assignments in response to the configuration of the defense. Webster was a master, barking out audibles, some of them decoys, assuming the role of the Steelers' field general. He studied game films endlessly—he often took them home—and came to know the Steelers' offense so well that he sometimes overruled Bradshaw in the huddle. "Ultimately he became the leader to the extent that he would call the plays," said Bleier. "Bradshaw would just say, 'Okay.'"

Webster was low to the ground, and he used that to his advantage. As the center, he often drew the gnarliest blocking assignments, the biggest and baddest linemen and linebackers. In the 3-4 defense (three down linemen) he was head up on nose tackles sometimes 50 pounds heavier. In the 4-3, he was responsible for taking on the middle linebacker. Gerry Sullivan, a former Cleveland center, recalled watching film of Webster taking on Oilers nose tackle Curley Culp, a former college wrestling champion and future Hall of Famer. Sullivan was astounded: Webster wasn't just blocking Curley Culp. He was *uprooting* him. "To me, the physics of it weren't even possible, you know?" Sullivan said. The Browns ran the film over and over, mesmerized. "You could hear a pin drop as we watched him do it like four times in a row. I don't know how he did what he did. He was just a force of nature."

One of Webster's greatest assets was his head. He used it as a battering ram, smashing it into his opponent as he exploded off the line. To stop Webster, nose tackles and linebackers tried to neutralize his head. Harry Carson, the great New York Giants linebacker, came into the NFL when Webster was in his prime. He found that his best strategy often was to bludgeon Webster as he fired off the line. "When I would explode into Mike, it was power against power," Carson said. "I would hit him in the face. That's what we were taught: to hit a guy right in the face so hard that they're dazed and stunned." Sullivan, who stayed friends with Webster for years, began to notice that a thick layer of scar tissue had formed on his forehead at the exact spot where he thrust his helmet into opposing linemen. Sullivan was jealous. It was a sign Webster was executing his block—play after play. "I was kind of disappointed that my forehead wasn't, um, disfigured," Sullivan said.

It wasn't just the games that had hardened Webster's head. Many

Steelers considered the games a break from their normal reality. "We were a collision football team," said Kolb. Years later, through collective bargaining, NFL players were able to cut down on contact during practice significantly, but not then. During training camp, the Steelers pounded one another for six weeks, often twice a day. During the season, Wednesdays and Thursdays were full-on contact. Friday brought goal-line drills—the teamwide equivalent of the Nutcracker. With the ball on the 2-yard line, the first-team offense cracked heads with the first-team defense over and over. It was one of Noll's favorite drills.

Gerry "Moon" Mullins, who played alongside Webster for six years, thought that the players had been programmed to ignore the pain caused by the continuous violence. "They'd drag you back to the huddle: 'Shake it off, man. We need your ass out here,'" he said. "Nobody knew any different. That's just sort of the way you were, sort of like the GIs when they bring in young kids and they program them: 'Rush that pillbox, that machine gun that's blazing out there!' Nobody in their right mind would do that."

Pam Webster said her husband often came home with searing headaches that he attributed to his job. When the headaches occurred, Webster would retreat to the bedroom and lie alone in the dark for hours.

If the Steelers' medical staff was aware of this condition, it was not recorded: Hundreds of pages of medical files accumulated over Webster's 15 years with the Steelers contain exactly two references to head injuries. One, dated December 19, 1982, Webster's eighth year in the NFL, indicated that he passed out after a game in Cleveland after experiencing weakness and dizziness. "He gives no history of head trauma," says the report, which attributes the blackout to low blood sugar. Webster, after his career ended, would tell one of his doctors that he absorbed several hard hits to the head in that game.

The only other reference to a head injury was on November 3, 1988: "Hit in the head during practice—complains of intermittent dizziness. No other symptoms or complaints. No nausea or headache."

The nearly blank record is not surprising. Webster rarely acknowledged his injuries, much less reported them.

There was a certain perverseness about it: The inner strength and mortal fear that drove Webster, lifting him to success beyond his wildest

dreams, was pushing him to play even in the most extreme circumstances. The more he achieved, the more he pushed. Stage, the Steelers' pilot, dropped by practice one Saturday to see Webster and was told he had been admitted to the hospital. The week before, Webster had lowered his head to make a block on a screen pass and had injured his neck badly. After the game, he took an injection for the pain and had an allergic reaction, according to Stage. Webster was admitted to Pittsburgh's Passavant Hospital and told he would be unable to play that Sunday.

When Stage went to visit him, he found Webster in traction with a high fever and a lump the size of a baseball on his neck. Webster confirmed that he would not be playing the next day and asked if Stage would mind swinging by with a couple of cans of snuff.

Stage showed up as promised, but Webster was gone. He had checked himself out and taken a cab to Three Rivers, where he played the entire game. No one attempted to dissuade him. On the contrary, when Webster walked through the door, Ron Blackledge, the offensive line coach, "about started crying," Ilkin recalled.

During one six-year stretch, Webster never missed a snap—a streak of 5,871 consecutive offensive plays. That did not include long snaps on punts, field goals, and extra points or the snaps he made in preseason and postseason games. When the streak finally ended in 1986 because of a "very badly dislocated elbow," Webster estimated that dating back to his sophomore year of high school, he had played in 300 out of 300 of his teams' games. He figured he had participated in 890 out of some 900 practices in the NFL.

As Webster was reaching the end of his career, the Steelers drafted a young running back. His name was Merril Hoge, and he had grown up in Pocatello, Idaho. Hoge was drafted in the tenth round, the 261st overall pick. His exposure to the Steelers and the NFL had come almost entirely through television. To Hoge, like most fans, the Pittsburgh Steelers were giants who roamed the earth. When he walked into the huddle for the first time, it was like walking onto a movie set.

And then, suddenly, Hoge found himself face-to-face with Mike Webster.

Hoge loved to hunt, and he thought that seeing Webster in his natural habitat was like being startled by some fantastic animal out in the wild. He was majestic. He had an aura. *That guy's been around*, Hoge thought. *That guy knows*. He looked at Webster's helmet. The rubber was partially scraped off the face mask, exposing the metal underneath. There were cracks and deep divots in the plastic shell, "like a bear had attacked it." Webster certainly could have obtained a new helmet. He didn't want one.

Hoge was Webster's roommate that season. It was like "rooming with your dad," he said, only more intimidating: "I mean, I was scared to death." He came to understand the many ways Iron Mike was driven to succeed and survive, his toughness and the underlying vulnerability. Webster lived by one central tenet: Never come off the field. During one game, the Steelers were getting blown out in Phoenix, 31–7 in the fourth quarter. Noll pulled all his starters, but Webster refused to leave.

As the offense huddled up, Webster turned to Hoge and said, "We're gonna take the ball and we're gonna shove it down their throats. You got me?"

"You talk about inspired, I mean, I had a rocket in my ass," Hoge said.

The drive ended with Hoge catching a 12-yard pass in the end zone. In Webster, Hoge came to see the totality of a football life.

He's the epitome of the NFL, Hoge thought. *Nobody was as tough as that dude. Nobody*.

The Steelers effectively cut Webster after the 1988 season, allowing him to become a free agent. He was devastated, having believed the team would keep him on as a player-coach. He announced his retirement and then took a job in Kansas City as a coach, but soon he was playing for the Chiefs. He lasted another two seasons. The end finally came in 1990. The Chiefs had a center of the future, Tim Grunhard, but he was struggling that year. Grunhard's father had died of cancer, and Tim was playing with a cast on his hand because of a dislocated thumb. One Sunday against the Broncos, head coach Marty Schottenheimer replaced him with Webster.

Grunhard was humiliated; he feared his career was over before it

started. Then he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up to see Webster stripping off his gear.

"What are you doing?" Schottenheimer said.

"You gotta put this guy in," Webster told him. "I'm not playing anymore."

Grunhard never forgot the gesture. He played 11 years in the NFL.

"It was the turning point of my career," he said.

As for Webster, he was done. He was 38 years old. That year, he had played with three broken ribs, a fractured right heel that never properly mended, and bulging discs in his back that his kids could see when they splashed around in the pool.

On a medical form that Webster filled out during his last season, he was asked whether he had neck pain, such as frequent stiffness, motion limitation, and so on.

"No," he replied.

Then, in the comments section, he added, "JUST ON MONDAYS."

Some years later, Noll would mention to one of Webster's doctors that there were times in the locker room when he would look over and see his powerful center, his offensive captain, the epitome of the NFL, with his head buried in his hands, seemingly in a daze.

Webster had built a 3,000-square-foot home in Kansas City for his retirement, a monument to everything he had achieved: a successful career, a stable family life, escape from the turmoil of the Northwoods. The house had its own phone booth so Brooke could carry on her teenage conversations in private. There was a pool down the street. "It was like he wanted to make our dreams come true," said Pam.

At first, that was exactly what it looked like: a beautiful dream. Pam loved Kansas City. So did the kids. But they began to notice changes in Mike, almost imperceptible at first but growing more noticeable during his final years in Pittsburgh and Kansas City and now impossible to ignore. Before, Mike rarely raised his voice; now his temper was short. He became easily distracted and forgetful. He was often lethargic and indecisive. Where Webster once had approached his work with unrelenting focus, now "he couldn't decide what to have for breakfast," Pam said.

Webster soon became obsessed with the failings of the monument he had created. "He was *angry* at that house," said Pam. "It got built, and then he found fault with everything." Minor leaks or a problem with the tile sent him into a rage. He thought the contractor was out to screw him. Without warning, seemingly, the Websters had financial problems. Mike had led Pam to believe they were set for life, but now they were having trouble making the house payments. She couldn't understand why.

Pam was at a loss for why it was happening or what to do. She worried it might have something to do with her or the kids. As Mike's behavior grew more erratic, Pam began to think that her husband was rapidly being replaced with another person who occupied the same body.

PSYCH 101

Chuck Noll had a question for the Pittsburgh Steelers' brain specialist. His name was Joe Maroon, and at the time he was the only one of his kind in the NFL. Maroon had been a pint-sized running back at Indiana University back in the late 1950s. Now, in 1991, he was one of the top neurosurgeons in the country, the chairman of the Department of Neurological Surgery at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh. To reach that position, Maroon had survived nearly two decades of rigorous medical study, including residencies at Georgetown, Oxford, and Indiana. He had edited or contributed to hundreds of books and papers on everything from orbital tumors to the management of cervical spine injuries. He had served as general program chairman of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, an international education society with thousands of members.

And now a football coach wanted to know: On what basis are you telling me that my quarterback can't play?

Steelers quarterback Bubby Brister had sustained a concussion the previous Sunday. Maroon, who moonlighted, unpaid, as the team's neurological consultant, had examined Brister and determined that he should sit out the next week against the Buffalo Bills.

Noll had gotten the Steelers job in 1969 after Joe Paterno turned it down. He was known around Pittsburgh as a Renaissance man who played guitar and dabbled in subjects as varied as photography, oceanography, and haute cuisine.

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Brister looked fine, Noll told Maroon. He was throwing well. He knew the plays. Maroon, though, insisted that Brister had to rest for a week.

"Those are the recommended guidelines for this type of concussion," Maroon explained.

"Well, who wrote the guidelines?" Noll said.

Maroon informed the coach that, in fact, he had, along with other top neurosurgeons experienced in sports medicine. The guidelines were based on previous experiments that had examined the effects of mild traumatic brain injury, the medical term for a concussion. In one series of early experiments, professors at Wayne State University dropped dogs, pigs, pregnant baboons, and human cadavers down an elevator shaft to study the effects of concussions. In another experiment, a researcher put metal helmets on monkeys and applied pneumatic arms, which were propelled back and forth rapidly, violently shaking the monkeys' heads. The monkeys were then euthanized and their brains cut out to examine the effect.

"Were the studies double-blinded?" Noll asked. "What are the metrics? I need more information."

Maroon fumed. Noll was undeniably sharp, but who was the doctor here? But the more Maroon thought about it, the more he had to admit that Noll was right. As common as concussions were, there was not a lot of useful information about the injury he could cite to justify his opinion that Bubby Brister shouldn't play.

In the long history of brain research, the concussion was still regarded as the neurological equivalent of a stubbed toe. The injury was as underrated by the medical profession as it was by the NFL. There was little research money devoted to it and it had no glamour, particularly for an area of study whose mystery and vastness are often compared to the study of the universe. There was widespread confusion about what a concussion was, not only in the general population but also among doctors and researchers; dozens of definitions had been floated and discarded.

The fact that concussions were practically an afterthought was perplexing when one considered what actually occurred. The brain is essentially an oddly shaped sphere of Jell-O, crammed inside a box, covered in a shallow layer of cerebrospinal fluid. This gelatinous material

contains a kind of electrical grid—hooked up to an EEG, the brain can power a toy train—that transmits information through the body via microscopic fibers called axons. When someone is hit in the head or stops suddenly, the brain is jolted against the skull's jagged interior, distorting or even severing the axons and interrupting the function of the synapses, the connections between the fibers of the brain. The immediate effect depends on where the connections are and the extent of the damage. Some people go temporarily blind. Others lose their memory or balance or become irritable. When the blow is particularly violent, the entire system short-circuits, like a neighborhood blackout, and the person loses consciousness.

In that context, you wondered why people hadn't taken concussions more seriously. But the focus had always been on catastrophic head injuries such as skull fractures or hemorrhages. In sports, what little research there was occurred almost by accident. One pioneer in the field was a genial, wisecracking neuropsychologist at the University of Virginia named Jeff Barth. "In the late seventies and early eighties, nobody thought mild head injury was a problem," said Barth, who resembled Hulk Hogan and liked to splice the wrestler's picture into his scientific presentations. "When you'd go to the doctor or the ER with a mild head injury, they'd say, 'Just take a couple days off, take some aspirin, and you'll be okay by Monday.'" As part of his work at Virginia, Barth saw emergency room patients from the Charlottesville area and other parts of Virginia. He and his colleagues began to notice that out of the hundreds of head injuries they treated each year, the majority were the so-called minor variety that involved either no loss of consciousness or blackouts lasting only a few minutes.

Because there were so many—Barth counted more than 1,200 concussions over a two-year period, often from traffic accidents—he decided to study them to see if he could improve treatment. He and his colleagues soon discovered that these mild head injuries often weren't so minor. "We did a three-month follow-up, and lo and behold, we found that about one-third of mild head injury patients hadn't returned to work," said Barth. "I thought, 'Wow, that's amazing! Why is that?'"

His findings struck a chord. The *Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page article in 1982 that described concussions as "a silent epidemic." Barth

was riding high until he went to a conference and presented the study to some of his colleagues.

"It was one of the worst days of my life," he said.

As he stood at the podium, the audience bombarded him with questions and doubts. Maybe Barth was testing only people who weren't very smart. Maybe they didn't return to work because they had an excuse from the doctor. What was his control group? "I thought to myself: 'How can I get out of this?'" said Barth. "'Maybe I can fake a seizure.'"

Barth decided he needed a more rigorous study. The important thing was to find patients who were likely to have concussions and were available for follow-up. "My initial idea was we could test all of the Psychology 101 students at the University of Virginia, follow them around campus and hit them with a two-by-four, and then test them again," he joked. Other groups were considered, including race car drivers and boxers. Finally one of his colleagues, Bruno Giordani, said: "What about football players? They run and hit things."

Thus was born an entirely new field: sports neuropsychology, the study of the brain under the influence of sports. "Unfortunately, some of my colleagues who like to get at me, they don't call me the Father of Sports Neuropsychology, they call me the *Grandfather* of Sports Neuropsychology," Barth said.

Barth started to perform tests on Virginia football players to measure their baseline performance—before they got conked on the head—on tasks such as word recognition and number sequencing. He and his colleagues positioned spotters at practices and games to be on the lookout for head injuries, then tested the players immediately after an injury occurred to measure differences in brain function.

The first experiments, in 1984, were a disaster. Out of the 100 or so players who participated, there were only a few documented concussions. Virginia was terrible that year, and before he was fired, the beleaguered coach shut down Barth's experiment in midseason. But Barth persisted. The next year, he expanded his study to include the Ivy League schools and what he referred to as "a real football team," the University of Pittsburgh. This time, the results were startling: Out of 2,350 players who participated, 195, or more than 8 percent, sustained verifiable concussions. More than half still had headaches at least five days after the

injury occurred. About a quarter still had signs of memory loss, nausea, and dizziness. Most of the symptoms cleared within 10 days.

What had started as an attempt to measure the effects of minor head injuries after traffic accidents had become a harbinger of football's soon to be tumultuous future. Barth's major discovery was that concussions might be regarded as "minor" injuries by coaches, trainers, and even doctors, but they weren't minor to the people who incurred them. He published his results in 1989. "Through further data review and analysis, it is our hope that we can provide the football community, and sports medicine psychologists in particular, with a brief and easily administered set of neuropsychological assessment tools that will aid team physicians," Barth wrote.

Now, two years later, Joe Maroon was faced with exactly that scenario. Chuck Noll wanted his quarterback, Bubby Brister, back on the field. Maroon, the Steelers' doctor, didn't agree. But he had no real tools to justify his assessment. As it turned out, Maroon had participated indirectly in Barth's study. In addition to his work with the Steelers, he was the neurological consultant for the Pitt Panthers—the "real football team" from Barth's experiment. Maroon didn't have enough concrete data to prevent Brister from playing, but perhaps here was a way to get at it.

Maroon went to the chief neuropsychologist at Allegheny General, Mark Lovell, and explained the situation.

"You know what, Mark?" Maroon said of Noll. "He's right."

Brister ended up playing, but that was the beginning of the story for Maroon, not the end.

To that point, the sports medical community had viewed a concussion as an invisible injury. You couldn't x-ray it or scope it or put a cast on it, so how serious could it be? Barth had shown that a player might appear normal, but if his brain wasn't functioning properly—as measured by changes in short-term memory, executive function, ability to reason, and so on—that was an indication the injury hadn't healed. As simple as it now seems, that discovery was groundbreaking.

Maroon says he didn't see a financial opportunity in the diagnosis of concussions until years later, when a colleague pointed it out to him.

This was still in the sleepy early days of the NFL's concussion crisis, and Maroon was merely looking for answers. He approached Lovell to try to figure out a way to better justify his on-field decisions to Noll and the players. But it was exactly the type of out-of-the-box idea that got Maroon's wheels spinning.

Joe Maroon was a neurosurgeon with a flair for business. He had picked it up from his father, a Lebanese immigrant who had hustled out a living in the Ohio River Valley by catering to the needs of the miners and rivermen. Charles Maroon operated Bridgeport's only bowling alley, serviced vending machines throughout the region, and built a truck stop in the northern tip of West Virginia. He owned a building that housed a strip joint called the Lucky Lady Lounge. Maroon worshiped his dad and decided to go into medicine only after thinking long and hard about whether he wanted to defy his father's wishes that he become a lawyer. Despite his size—about 5-feet-5, 160 pounds—Maroon attended Indiana on a football scholarship, started at halfback for two seasons, and was a scholastic All-American. When he was in his early forties, his wife left him and his father died in the same week. He briefly left medicine and went back to Bridgeport to run his father's truck stop, a midlife crisis that left him suicidal. Exercise helped save him. He became a health enthusiast and ran triathlons all over the world. Still competing in his sixties and seventies, Maroon wrote a book called *The Longevity Factor* in which he recommended a number of novel "secrets" to a long and healthy life.

As admired as Maroon was, there was a whiff of opportunism about him that some of his colleagues found distasteful. He seemed to combine his neurosurgery practice and his entrepreneurship in ways that pushed the envelope. Maroon touted the wonders of red wine and fish oil as the keys to staving off everything from depression to Alzheimer's disease to death itself. No one doubted that he believed what he was promoting—Maroon looked great, a trim man with a full head of graying hair—but he often seemed to have an angle. When Maroon sold his neurosurgery practice to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, some of his colleagues were surprised to learn in the *Post-Gazette* that UPMC had agreed to purchase real estate owned by Maroon for \$6.22 million. "Joe has a lot of great qualities, he has legions of patients

that legitimately adore him," said one doctor who worked with him for years. "He's done well at the professional level in all respects, including with the Steelers. But everything has to have an immediate entrepreneurial angle. You can't just appreciate it for whatever its value is, you know? There has to be: 'How can we take advantage of that?' And that's the thing that to me is a little off-putting."

Shortly after the Bubby Brister affair, Maroon sat down in the cafeteria at Allegheny General with Mark Lovell and laid out what he was thinking.

Lovell (pronounced LOVE-uhl) didn't have much experience in sports, but he had personal experience with concussions. During his junior year of high school in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he was picked up hitchhiking by a drunk driver and was thrown through the windshield when the car crashed into a parked car. "My head went through and then recoiled back," he said. "If you look at my nose, you can see that they kind of sewed it back on."

Lovell needed 120 stitches. But what he noticed over time was that the more serious problem was his head. For the next several years he had migraine headaches. "I had a concussion, but nobody called it a concussion," Lovell said.

Lovell was reserved and soft-spoken, with straight brown hair, a goatee, and an earnest manner that later made his role as one of the most controversial figures in the NFL's concussion saga seem incongruous. His specialty was neuropsychology—Jeff Barth's world—a relatively modern discipline that seemed to baffle everyone around him. Lovell's father, a Grand Rapids auto mechanic, proudly introduced his son as a "psycho neurologist." Lovell's fundamental job was to assess brain function, and Maroon had come to him with an intriguing proposition.

Maroon wanted to see if Barth's experiment could be adapted to the NFL. He wanted to know specifically if Lovell could design a neuropsychological test that could be used to establish baseline data for the Steelers and then use that test to assess changes in brain function after a concussion. If there were major changes, Maroon would have quantifiable data to present to Noll and help guide his decisions about whether a player should return. Lovell quickly agreed. The test itself wouldn't be hard. Barth already had administered it to college players, and so it was

really a matter of updating the test—actually a series of tests to measure memory, executive function, and so on. The tests already existed; they were used to assess stroke patients, people with dyslexia, accident victims—any number of neurological disorders. The hardest part was devising an exam that could be administered in the heat of a game. “The thing I learned very, very quickly is that you didn’t have an abundance of time to do this,” Lovell said. “Neuropsychologists at that point would spend four or five or six hours with a patient. That doesn’t work in sports.” At most Lovell would have 15 or 20 minutes, maybe half an hour. He borrowed liberally from Barth’s study and other neuropsych tests that were floating around and tried to keep it all to one sheet of paper.

Maroon went to Noll and Steelers owner Dan Rooney for approval. The test wasn’t expensive—it was all done with paper and pencil—but the team needed to make the research subjects—the players—available. Noll and Rooney agreed under the condition that the testing would be voluntary. Anything more would have to be cleared through the NFL Players Association, and that wasn’t likely.

The players greeted the idea with suspicion. Many thought the team was literally trying to get into their heads by assembling psychological profiles that could be used in contract negotiations. Or secretly administering IQ tests. Or looking for potential deviants. The NFL already put rookies through the controversial Wonderlic test, which Lovell described as “a test to see if you’re too stupid to play in the NFL.” He didn’t want his test to be confused with that. “I didn’t blame the players,” he said. “I said, ‘This has to be seen as something that’s only for injury management.’”

The players were slow to come around. “Their agents called, their mothers called, everyone called until we convinced them that it was to their benefit,” said Maroon. “If they had a concussion and we went by the previous guidelines, they might be out for three weeks. But if neurocognitively they returned to normal, we might be able to let them go back on the field sooner.”

Twenty-seven Steeler guinea pigs ultimately volunteered after Maroon and Lovell guaranteed that the results would remain private. It was now 1993, and Maroon and Lovell were trying not to offend anyone.

“To be honest with you, I thought it was pretty cool to be nerds and get to do this stuff, to work with athletes,” said Lovell. “We didn’t want to get ourselves thrown out by becoming a pain in the neck.” He tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. A speech pathologist administered the baseline tests during training camp. Lovell kept the data locked in a filing cabinet in his office.

The immediate hope was that the data would be used to help decide when a player was ready to return after sustaining a concussion. But almost from the beginning it went well beyond that.

One of the first guinea pigs was Webster’s former roommate Merrill Hoge. He wasn’t totally sure why he signed up. “You couldn’t be forced to do it, and I actually didn’t want to do it,” Hoge said. Like everyone else, he thought that on the spectrum of potential career-ending injuries, a concussion wouldn’t even register. “I mean, I got a helmet on,” he reasoned. But he shrugged and took the test.

In his six years since being drafted, Hoge had learned a lot about the speed and brutality of the NFL. What he hadn’t learned from Webster, he had experienced himself. He found that there was a primitive quality to the pro game: Those who survived ate, paid their mortgages, and supported their kids on football. “No wonder it’s so intense,” he thought to himself. “This is people’s livelihoods.” He was astonished at how nakedly cutthroat it all was. One day at practice, an injured player violated Noll’s edict to keep away from drills. The rule was a not-so-subtle message: If you’re injured, not only are you of no use to us but we don’t want you tainting the rest of the team. The player had wandered too close to the drill, apparently trying to impress the coaches, when Noll spotted him and said: “Go on. Get out of here.”

The player moved closer, not totally comprehending. “No, get your stuff,” said Noll. “You’re done.”

“He cut him right there on the field,” Hoge said.

Hoge made his mind up that he would compensate for whatever physical limitations he had by following the rules and making himself indispensable. He made the Steelers in 1987 as a third-string fullback. His second year he started eight games but led the team in rushing. By his third year, Hoge owned the job. He was the quintessential Steelers

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running back—tough, a grinder. He reminded some people of Rocky Bleier, another rugged back who blocked well, caught passes, churned out yards, and, above all, never gave an inch.

At some point in his career, Hoge decided he understood why the rule makers of professional football created the huddle: “It’s a chance for everybody to pause and go, ‘Okay, does anybody want to quit?’ It’s so physically challenging that you need that 35 seconds to revisit” your decision.

One afternoon against the Philadelphia Eagles, Hoge caught a pass and turned upfield when he ran into the linebacker Seth Joyner. The two men had collided on a similar play the previous year, with Hoge getting the better of Joyner. This time the collision triggered a melee. After the two men were separated, Hoge screamed: “I’ll whip your ass, Seth, you punk!” The two players returned to their respective huddles near their own goal line when Brister called for a draw play. He handed off to Hoge, who found himself staring into a human wall. It consisted not only of Seth Joyner but also of Jerome Brown, a defensive tackle, and Reggie White, one of the most feared defensive ends in the history of the NFL.

Hoge thought: I’m gonna fuck them up. I’m gonna hit them as hard as they’ve ever been hit in their life.

He plunged headfirst into the wall. “When I hit, I felt like my internal organs just went out my ass,” he said. “It was like *poof!*”

He struggled to the sideline and sidled up to his friend Tunch Ilkin, the Steelers offensive tackle.

“Hey, Tunch, look around at the back of my pants,” Hoge said. “I think I shit my pants.”

Ilkin at first couldn’t detect anything. Hoge lifted up his jersey.

“You shit your pants,” said Ilkin.

“I played a whole quarter like that,” Hoge said. “We’re in the huddle, and everyone’s like, ‘Gawd, does it stink?’”

Hoge thought concussions were the least of his concerns. But he did notice that the effects were varied and sometimes bizarre. One Sunday at Denver’s Mile High Stadium, he ran into Steve Atwater, the Broncos free safety, and found that he couldn’t remember the plays or the

snap count. He went to the sideline to sort it out and suddenly, without warning, burst into tears. He felt humiliated. Only later did Hoge learn that this was another symptom of a concussion: If the area of the brain that controls emotions becomes damaged, people sometimes cry unexpectedly.

Often, the most devastating hits occurred in practice. One day, the Steelers’ first-team offense was playing against the first-team defense, when a play was called that required Hoge to block the strong safety Donnie Shell. Shell weighed just 185 pounds, but his technique was so refined that it was like he turned himself into a tactical missile. When Hoge heard the call in the huddle, he began to pump himself up. He weighed 225 pounds and figured that his greater mass would win the day. “I’m gonna bust that little punk in half,” he thought. Hoge wheeled around end and headed straight for Shell. The two men collided in the open field at full speed.

“When I hit him, it was like a lightning bolt ran right through my body, like I’d been paralyzed and electrocuted at the same time,” Hoge said. “My helmet got knocked off, and literally on the left side I was numb. I couldn’t move.”

Hoge was still lying there when he heard Noll’s voice ring out: “*That’s it! Now that’s how you got to hit him!*”

Through his haze Hoge heard: “Run it again!”

In 1994, one year after he participated in Maroon and Lovell’s experiment (and promptly forgot about it), Hoge signed as a free agent with the Chicago Bears. It would not be a long and fruitful relationship.

During an exhibition Monday-night game at Kansas City, Hoge caught a pass out of the backfield and headed toward the goal line. Several defenders closed in, including nine-time Pro Bowl linebacker Derrick Thomas. As Hoge braced himself for the collision, Thomas plowed his helmet into Hoge’s ear hole.

Hoge lay on the turf, motionless. “I’ve never been in an earthquake, but the first thing I thought was, ‘Holy cow, man, the earth is shaking,’ ” he said. “It was shaking so bad I couldn’t get up. I had no equilibrium. I was like, ‘This damn earth won’t quit shaking.’ ” Tim Worley, a former Steelers running back who had come over with Hoge, was one of

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the first people to arrive on the scene. "Aw, damn," Worley said, looking down at his obliterated friend.

Worley was about to motion for the trainers, but then, amazingly, Hoge got up. His brain was on autopilot. It was as if Webster were inside his head screaming: "Get up!" Hoge made it through one more play and then stumbled to the sideline.

"Where are you?" a trainer asked.

"Tampa Bay," he replied.

Asked why he thought that, since he was standing on the field at Arrowhead Stadium, Hoge said: "Because I can hear the ocean."

The Bears sent him to the hospital for a computed tomography (CT) scan. At one point, Hoge wandered off and was found in a waiting room three floors up. He had no idea how he had gotten there.

As he prepared to board the team plane that night back to Chicago, Hoge already was thinking about the next game.

"Do you think I'll be able to play?" he asked Bears physician John Munsell.

"We'll let you know tomorrow," Munsell said.

When Hoge arrived at the Bears' training facility the next day, he looked in the mirror and was shocked. His face was white. His head was pounding "like I had been hit with a bat." But still he wanted to play even though the next game was also an exhibition. When the head trainer, Fred Caito, informed him he'd have to sit out on Munsell's orders, Hoge asked if he could call the doctor and try to talk him out of it. The trainer said no.

Hoge came back the next day.

"Did you guys change your mind?" he asked Caito.

The answer was still no. Hoge now set his sights on the season opener, two weeks away. He desperately wanted to play. The Bears, who had just signed him to a three-year, \$2.4 million contract, wanted that too, of course. Unlike Pittsburgh, the Bears had neither a neurological specialist like Joe Maroon nor a diagnostic test to measure how Hoge's brain was functioning. It was all an educated guess as to whether Hoge, chomping at the bit, was fit to play again.

And so one week after Hoge thought he heard the ocean in Kansas City, he rejoined the Bears in preparation for the regular-season opener

against Tampa Bay. Hoge knew he wasn't right. He still had blinding headaches and sometimes forgot the snap count. "I mean, most people now when I tell them, it's like, 'How stupid are you?'" Hoge said. "Listen, I didn't go to school to be a neurological doctor."

Hoge played in the season opener and three more games after that. Then, on October 2, the Bears took on the Buffalo Bills at Soldier Field. Early in the game, Hoge bent low to make a block. What happened next is a blur. When Hoge reached the sideline, his chin was sliced open and his face mask caved in. A Bears assistant had to pry it off to treat him. Hoge was unresponsive, staring into space, and so the Bears sent him to the locker room.

He was sitting on the training table when he heard someone say, "Man, are you all right?"

His eyelids fluttered, and he fell to the floor. Hoge had stopped breathing; doctors later told him that 20 seconds passed before he was revived.

He was taken to Northwestern Memorial Hospital in an ambulance. The Bears initially didn't disclose the extent of his injury, announcing only that he had sustained his second concussion in six weeks and a lacerated chin that required stitches. Hoge held out hope for another quick return. He was released from the hospital the next day and went straight to Halas Hall, the Bears' practice facility, wearing the same clothes he'd worn to Sunday's game. He told a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* that he hoped to play the next week.

In reality, Hoge was in a fog. There were many things he could no longer remember, including his two-year-old daughter's name. A few days later, he went for a doctor's appointment and was found wandering aimlessly in a hospital corridor. The doctor, sensing his confusion, asked him: "Who's the President of the United States?" Hoge didn't know that, either. By the end of the first week, the Bears were saying that Hoge was out indefinitely. The team sent him to specialists and put him through a battery of tests and scans.

When Hoge realized he wasn't getting any better, he decided to return to Pittsburgh to see Joe Maroon and Mark Lovell.

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The concussion test that Lovell and Maroon had created was designed to assess exactly this type of injury: How badly hurt was Merrill Hoge's brain? Lovell pulled out Hoge's baseline scores from the original Group of 27 and administered the exam to Hoge again.

When he saw the results, Lovell did a double take; he had never seen a football player so impaired. It had been almost two weeks since Hoge had sustained his second concussion, but his scores were half of what they'd been a year earlier.

One of the tests, the Wechsler Memory Scale, measured short-term memory in a variety of ways. One involved repeating a random sequence of numbers forward and backward. A year earlier, Hoge had tested in the sixty-first percentile on the backward test and the twentieth percentile on the forward test. This time, he tested in the eleventh percentile backward and the second percentile forward.

Lovell then administered the Controlled Oral Word Association Test, in which the subject is asked to list as many words as possible from a specific category—words starting with the letter *B*, for example. Profanity was allowed. Some players called it the "Fuck Ass Shit Test."

Before his concussion, Hoge listed 43 words in 60 seconds. After: 21.

Hoge then took the Trail Making Test, a measure of mental flexibility in which he was asked to connect a set of 25 dots as quickly as possible. He couldn't complete it.

Lovell showed the results to Maroon. The neurosurgeon was shaken. It was as if Hoge had run his car into a wall at high speed. Maroon's first thought was: "I don't want anybody to die following a football game on my watch."

He summoned Hoge to Allegheny General. Maroon's office was packed with Steelers memorabilia, plastic brains, neurological textbooks, and dozens of papers Maroon had written on brain science.

He laid it out bluntly: "You do this to your brain again, I can't help you. Whatever happens, it's done, it's final, it's finished. If you drool or you can't speak or you can't function, I can't do anything about that. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I allowed you to play again."

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Maroon asked.

Hoge did. More than anyone, he was painfully aware of how hurt he was. The inside of his head was broken. He was incapable of living

his life, much less playing professional football. For nearly a decade, Hoge had ignored pain and injury to keep himself on the field. It was part of what had made him so successful. Even in that final game, Hoge had been playing with a broken hand. After the concussion, doctors had fitted him with a cast, reasoning that he wouldn't be playing again for a while. But there was no cast for what he was dealing with now.

"You're just gonna take this?" Hoge thought to himself. "You're not gonna put up a fight or question him? You're just gonna go: 'Okay'?"

But that was exactly what he did. Hoge flew back to Chicago, notified his teammates, and officially announced his retirement from the NFL. He was 29.

Over the next several months, as Hoge's memory slowly returned, Maroon would get phone calls in the middle of the night. He knew who it was before he answered. "Hey, you know, Doc, I feel great!" Hoge would say. "There's nothing wrong with me!"

Maroon would patiently walk Hoge through it all over again. There was no telling what might happen if he got hit again. He could lose his memory permanently, even his life. And there was always the chance that he would accelerate the process that led to a series of devastating diseases: Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, dementia.

Hoge would let it pass until the next time he ached to get back on the field. Then he'd call Maroon again.

One night, Hoge went to make a personal appearance in Pittsburgh. It was a wine tasting, of all things. Hoge didn't drink wine, but he had committed to going, and so he showed up and pretended he cared or knew anything about wine. He commented on how one wine was bold and one was dry and one was wet.

"Here, try this one," someone said.

"So I did the little swirling thing; I was gonna be a smart-ass and take a little sip," Hoge said. He pressed it to his lips. And then the world went black.

"Everything shut off," he said. "I mean, there was nothing. I scratched my eyes. I blinked my eyes, and I couldn't see a thing."

For ten seconds Hoge couldn't see. When his sight came back, he

called Maroon in a panic. The Steelers were in New York playing the Jets, and Hoge reached Maroon at the team hotel. Maroon told him it was an indication that part of his brain was still traumatized.

"This is what I'm trying to tell you, Merrill," Maroon said. "You're not healed. Are you willing to risk your vision to play?"

Hoge understood.

"I won't be calling you anymore," he said.

"DAD IS IN OHIO"

The dream house had turned into a nightmare. Besides the leaks and the minor flaws, real and imagined, that Mike Webster constantly complained about, the reality was that he couldn't afford it. Pam didn't know where the money had gone. Mike had earned more than \$1 million over the last three years of his career. The Websters needed to move on, but Mike was paralyzed—*mentally* paralyzed. For two decades he had been the forceful leader of his household, his every decision creating comfort and stability for his wife and his children, but now he changed plans every hour. Pam woke up wondering: Am I staying in Kansas City? Am I going back to Pittsburgh? Am I going home to Wisconsin?

For most professional athletes, retirement is like falling off a cliff. Webster was 40. He had played 17 years in the NFL, 245 regular-season games. It had provided him with a militaristic structure for his life: train, practice, play; his work schedule was so rigid that it was printed up in the newspaper every fall. Now all of that had been ripped away. It was a struggle all professional football players went through: After so much violence, the transition was a form of post-traumatic stress. Most had trouble coping on some level, but this was different. People who came in contact with Webster found him delusional about both his career prospects and how and where he and his family would survive.

Bob Stage, the Steelers' pilot and his close friend, flew out to Kansas City to spend a weekend with Webster. In some ways, he was the

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same old Webby; Mike still called him Robert, using the faux French pronunciation, and was generous to a fault. Stage knew that some of the financial problems could be traced to people who had treated Mike like an ATM: "They took his generous heart and took advantage of him."

"You're the only friend who's never asked me for money," Mike once told Stage. But in Kansas City, Stage found Webster totally unrealistic about his future. One warm evening, Webster decided he wanted to throw a baseball around. "Mike had so much nervous energy, he about wore my arm out," said Stage. "The sad part is, he wouldn't listen to anybody. That night when we were playing catch he told me: 'I'm gonna become an agent.' I said, 'Mike, you didn't even get your degree at Wisconsin. How are you going to do that?' He would come up with these ideas, but the dots didn't connect."

"I think I'm gonna sell RVs," Mike said to Pam one morning. The next day he announced: "I think I'm gonna go to chiropractor school."

Pam ended the indecision by persuading Mike to sell the dream house at a steep loss. The Websters put their belongings—furniture, sports equipment, almost everything they owned—in a storage unit and moved back to Wisconsin to start over. They eventually bought a four-bedroom house in Lodi, Pam's hometown, not far from her parents. When they were living in Pittsburgh, Mike and Pam had imagined a simple life after football, with trees and open space, maybe even a log cabin. But the new Mike spent indiscriminately. He bought a speedboat and a pair of Harley Softail Fat Boy motorcycles, toys for his retirement. Where the money came from—and where it went—remained a mystery. Pam later learned that Mike had opened some two dozen checking accounts, stopped paying taxes, and drained three annuities that had been set up for their retirement and the kids' college fund.

Instead of settling on a career, Mike became nomadic, not a traveling salesman but a man on the road in search of a deal—a dreamer and a schemer. He disappeared from the Lodi house for weeks at a time. Unpaid bills began to show up in the mail. Many seemed related to business endeavors that Pam had never known about and that had gone nowhere. Then one day the phone rang.

"Is this Pam Webster?" a woman asked. "I have some of your stuff."

"What do you mean you have some of our stuff?" said Pam.

"Dad Is in Ohio"

"Well, we were at an auction, and we bought one of your buffets. It had some of your personal items in it. I'd like to send them to you."

Mike had stopped paying the rent on the storage unit in Kansas City. The company had auctioned off the contents—almost all of the Websters' possessions.

On the occasions when he returned home, Pam and the kids were never certain which Mike would show up. There was Good Mike—gentle with the kids, a loving husband, relatively normal—and Bad Mike—irrational, even destructive. Usually his anger was directed at Pam. She figured out a way to gauge his moods: If her picture was upright on Mike's desk, everything was fine. If it was turned over, she knew to stay out of his way. His eruptions were almost always followed by profuse apologies and profound sorrow over his lack of control.

Each week seemed to bring another low point in Webster's accelerating transformation. One day, Pam returned from a trip to the store to find all the photographs and portraits of Mike as a player dumped on the floor. The pictures were slashed, the frames broken to pieces. As bad as it was, Pam thought it was worse because she was unable to shield the kids from what was happening to their superhero dad, who now seemed to be lashing out at everything he had been. "It was horrible for the kids to see their dad destroying pictures of himself," she said.

One afternoon, Webster took his seven-year-old son Garrett into Madison to pick up some medication. In addition to his deteriorating mental state, Webster was in constant pain: ice pick headaches, throbbing knees, gnarled hands, an aching back. To relieve the pain, he took whatever he could get his hands on: Vicodin, Ultram, Darvocet, Loracet. When they pulled up at the drugstore, Webster told Garrett to run in and get the medication. He told the boy that in no circumstances was he to let anyone know he was outside. But of course, when Garrett looked up from the counter and asked for his father's painkillers, the pharmacist explained that he couldn't give pills to a little boy.

"Is your dad here?" he asked.

"Yes, he's out in the car. I'll go get him," Garrett said.

When Garrett told his father what had happened, Webster frantically drove off.

"He just started yelling for probably 35 minutes straight," Garrett

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said. "I'm seven years old at the time, he just started yelling, hitting the dashboard of the car, stuff like that, talking about how now everybody's gonna know he was there. That's where we really noticed he was becoming paranoid. It was always, 'Somebody's following me, or somebody's going through my garbage or listening on the phone line.' " Within ten minutes of the outburst, Webster had apologized and bought Garrett a toy.

And then, like a passing storm, Webster would be gone again, his whereabouts unknown. The Websters soon developed a dark inside joke to explain his long absences: "Dad is in Ohio." It was an all-encompassing catchphrase to be used at missed family functions, school events, important meals. *Dad is in Ohio*. Sometimes the phone would break the silence, like a radar blip revealing a lost ship or plane. It would be Mike, calling from the road about some new scheme. Or it might be the police in Columbus, Wisconsin, a little town east of Lodi, calling to say that Mike had been sleeping in the train station for two days. Would someone please come get him?

Mike sent just about every dime of whatever money he earned back to Pam and the kids, but it came in a trickle. Ultimately, the Lodi house went into foreclosure, and Pam scrambled to get a job and a modest apartment.

Finally, in 1994, Webster returned to Kansas City. Carl Peterson, the team's president and general manager, had tossed him a life preserver. Webby would be the Chiefs' strength and conditioning coach. In normal circumstances, it would have been the perfect assignment. But later, few people recalled him playing much of a role. Marty Schottenheimer, the head coach, would say he didn't even remember that Webster had been around.

For much of the season, Webster lived in a storage closet above the weight room at Arrowhead Stadium. "It was pretty spartan," said Bob Moore, then the team's public relations director and now the Chiefs' historian. "It consisted of a cot and broken weight machines. It was sad, but he was never down about it. He wasn't complaining about it."

Moore had the impression that Webster was either estranged from Pam or divorced; it was obvious that Peterson was trying to help him through a tough time. Webster sometimes appeared at practices, snapping the ball during drills, and also worked with players in the weight

room. But he was as much a hanger-on as he was a coach. No one was entirely sure what to make of his presence, this living legend just four years removed from playing in the NFL but seemingly dropped in from another galaxy.

Tim Grunhard was now the Chiefs' starting center. Webster had mentored him during his rookie year, and the two men were close. During his rookie season, Grunhard had noticed some fits of irrationality, but he thought Webster was just quirky. Now, four years later, he saw that Webster was a changed man. "I can't put my finger on what it was, but he wasn't the same guy," said Grunhard.

Webster spent a good chunk of that season with the Chiefs. One day, Moore noticed that he hadn't been around for a while.

"Where's Mike?" he asked.

He's got some other opportunities in some other places, came the response.

What those opportunities were, nobody seemed to know.

When Sunny Jani first heard that Mike Webster was sleeping at the Greyhound bus station in downtown Pittsburgh, he couldn't believe his good fortune. The wheels started spinning immediately. Jani wasn't really that curious about Webster's fall from grace. Rather, he was plotting how he could befriend the former Steeler and make some money off him.

Sunny Jani was his given name. Born outside Bombay, he'd moved to Pittsburgh with his family when he was 12. His parents settled in McKees Rocks, a hardscrabble former steel enclave on the other side of the Ohio River. Sunny's father opened the Blue Eagle Market on Broadway, and when Sunny wasn't at school, he could be found hanging out at the family convenience store, stealing packs of trading cards from his dad. Like most Indian boys, Sunny grew up around cricket and soccer; he found American football difficult to comprehend—Wow, they're killing each other for a little frickin' ball, he thought—though it wasn't hard to pick up on the religious fanaticism that surrounded the Steelers. Jani stole so many packs of trading cards—his father looking the other way—that he eventually accumulated enough to open his own card shop next door to the market.

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Sunny knew that Webster had played "a million years" in the NFL, possessed four Super Bowl rings, and was one of the most beloved Steelers of all time. For an enterprising young memorabilia dealer, it was a rare trifecta. After hearing about Webster's plight, he drove to the Greyhound station, and sure enough, there he was, disheveled but unmistakably himself. Webster was sitting alone on a bench, his long, unkempt hair spilling out of a dirty cowboy hat. He was surrounded by a half dozen duffel bags filled with clothes and books. No one appeared to notice the legend in their midst.

Sunny introduced himself and made his pitch.

"Mr. Webster, would you like to come sign autographs? I would pay you for it."

"You're gonna pay me for my autograph?" Webster replied.

Thus was born the Mike Webster-Sunny Jani partnership. Mike followed Sunny out of the bus station—a homeless former Steeler and his spindly twentysomething Indian guide. Jani got Webster a haircut, took him to Kmart to buy new clothes, and rented him a room for a month at the Red Roof Inn—at a discounted rate, since Sunny immediately was able to trade on Webster's name to get a good deal.

Sunny was using Webster, but he seemed to drain some of the sleaziness out of the transaction by being so outrageously transparent about his motives. Every day, people try to turn a celebrity or a sports star into their meal ticket, but seldom do they announce it to the world. Sunny didn't take a percentage from the first deals he made for Webster. That was part of his strategy. "I wanted him to trust me and build up a relationship with him," Sunny said. "My hidden agenda was I wanted to get famous. I said, 'You know, this is my meal ticket, but I have to take care of him.'"

Webster, perhaps the most guileless man in the world, especially in his addled state, wouldn't hear of it. He insisted that Sunny get his fair share. Jani suggested a 10 percent cut. Webster countered with a 50-50 split, and there wouldn't be any negotiating. Sunny knew it was ridiculous, unfair even. He used much of his proceeds to buy groceries for Webster or pay off some of the bills Webster was ignoring.

Sunny secured appearance fees for Webster all over Pittsburgh: \$150 to sign autographs at a bowling alley here or a flea market there,

\$5,000 to give a speech at Sears. Sunny once arranged an appearance in a friend's garage, where Webster signed autographs for \$10 a head. He cut deals for Webster at restaurants, persuading the managers to let the Steelers great eat for free or at a discount. He exchanged Webster's autograph for rent, for cars, for medical expenses, for whatever he could conceive.

"You know, now I feel bad, but I kind of whored him out," Jani said years later.

One client, a meter reader named Dennis, became a cash cow for Sunny and Mike. Dennis was massively overweight, and Webster was entertained by watching him inhale a meal. "He made love to food," Sunny explained. They would go to all-you-can eat buffets at Ponderosa or a Chinese restaurant, with Dennis, of course, paying the freight.

On occasion, Dennis would pay \$300 to have Webster come to his apartment and watch a game. Sunny set up this unusual business transaction perhaps a half dozen times until Webster began to feel guilty. Because Dennis liked to hang around, Sunny recruited him into the motley collection of people he employed to keep Webster's life from completely falling apart. Jani dubbed it Team Webster.

Sunny had become the center of Mike Webster's universe. Their relationship, born of exploitation, had shifted until they were now more like a patient and his deeply loyal caretaker. Webster often needed help just getting through the day, his body and mind deteriorating rapidly in opposite directions: Physically, he was an old man. Mentally, he was becoming a child.

As much as Jani tried to keep Mike's life stable, Webster remained perpetually on the move, as if he couldn't sit still. He spent hours driving all over the Midwest, sometimes sleeping in the homes of old friends, or in his cluttered Suburban, or in bus or train stations. By 1996, Webster would estimate he had spent about a year and a half of the last five sleeping in his car.

Webster made the drive from Pittsburgh to Wisconsin and back dozens of times without incident. But suddenly it became an adventure. He was practically living out of his truck, hauling around all his belongings, mainly clothes and books. To the very end, Webster loved to read and write, and the truck was filled with piles of books: Louis L'Amour novels,

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historical tomes on JFK, Winston Churchill's works, Patton's greatest quotes, which he used to prop up his flagging moods. "He knew his story wasn't gonna end well," Webster's youngest son, Garrett, would say.

Sometimes on those drives, Webster would call Jani in the middle of the night, lost and out of gas, with no money.

The conversations all went something like this:

Sunny: Mike, what do you see around you? What's the mile marker? What highway are you on?

Webster: I see a lot of trees.

It became such a regular occurrence that Jani started hiding money—\$20 here, \$50 there—inside different books. He always put the money on page 52, Webster's number with the Steelers.

"Mike, I put \$50 on page 52 of *Remembering JFK*," Jani would tell him.

Not long after he met Webster, Jani got married; he and his wife had a baby girl. But Webster came to consume so much of Jani's life that Jani was perpetually on call. He finally gave Webster the garage code to his home so that Webster could let himself in and sleep in the basement. Other times, Webster could be found sleeping in the back office at the Blue Eagle.

"You love Mike more than you love me," complained Jani's wife, Marsha. Whenever Mike called, Sunny jumped.

Soon Jani was divorced.

"We built up a great relationship of trust and love," Jani said.

He was talking not about his wife but about Webster.

So much of Mike's life was coming apart in 1996. In May, Pam, with little choice, filed for divorce; Webster was so out of it, he didn't realize until years later that his marriage had been dissolved. The IRS slapped him with a \$250,000 tax lien. His health continued to get worse. In the six years since his retirement, Webster had experienced fainting spells. He was hospitalized with heart problems and colitis. During one inexplicable stretch, he lost 20 pounds in three days. Doctors informed him he had lymphoma—until it turned out to be an infection; no one

"Dad Is in Ohio"

was able to explain why it occurred or went away. Even a minor cut on his leg wasn't simple. Where a Band-Aid would suffice for anyone else, blood spurted out of Webster's leg to the point that he began applying Super Glue to stanch the bleeding.

When Webster showed up at the offices of Dr. Stanley Marks on September 5, 1996, Marks, who had treated him for years, reported that his patient's life had "really deteriorated." Marks continued: "He has had major problems with depression and obsessive compulsive behavior and is currently being treated with Ritalin and Paxil. . . . He also has frequent stress headaches."

One morning that summer, a manager at the Amtrak station in downtown Pittsburgh called the Steelers' offices: Webster had been there all night. Joe Gordon, the team's longtime public relations director, said he would be right over. The Rooney family had hired Gordon in 1969, the same year they had hired Chuck Noll, in an effort to upgrade the previously dismal franchise. Gordon was a Pittsburgh native who had played varsity baseball at Pitt and whose hard-knuckle attitude fit perfectly with the brawling team. In the days preceding the 1976 AFC Championship Game against the hated Raiders, Gordon decked an Oakland TV reporter. Asked the next day if his team was ready, Noll said, "I don't know, but Joe Gordon is."

Gordon had developed great respect for Webster during his 15 seasons with the Steelers. Like everyone, he was wowed by the center's work ethic and was well aware of the brutal childhood that drove him. As the PR director, Gordon also was impressed by Webster's generosity.

"He was always very accommodating, never ever turned down an interview request or to visit a sick kid or go to Children's Hospital," Gordon said. "Mike was always there."

When Webster earned \$500 for doing a print ad that Gordon helped set up, Webster tried to give him half the money.

"If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have had this opportunity," Webster said.

"Mike, that's part of my job," Gordon replied.

Before Gordon left for the train station, he stopped by owner Dan Rooney's office to tell his boss about Webster. Gordon said he planned to take \$200 out of petty cash to help Iron Mike. Rooney agreed that

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was a good plan. Gordon found Webster sitting at a counter, hovering over a pile of photographs of great athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Mickey Mantle. Webster looked messy, his clothes wrinkled, but Gordon didn't think he appeared all that different from the way he often did. When Webster saw Gordon, he seemed unsurprised that the two old friends were meeting in the train station or that one of them seemed to be sleeping there.

"It was just like I'd seen him two or three days ago," Gordon said. "It was a normal meeting with him."

Webster explained that he had acquired the rights to distribute the high-quality photos of sports greats. He told Gordon he was going to make a fortune. Gordon quickly deduced that the business, or at least its prospects, was a figment of Mike's imagination.

"Well, come on, you've got to get out of here," Gordon said. "Where are you staying?"

"I've got a place to stay," Webster said, mentioning the Red Roof Inn.

Before home games, the Steelers stayed at the Hilton, and Gordon suggested that the team could put him up there for the weekend. Webster agreed. He stayed on through the weekend and well beyond that, with no one pressing him to leave. Occasionally, Gordon would stop by, and it appeared as if Webster never left the room. Clothes, towels, candy wrappers, the remains of two-day-old room service were strewn everywhere. Webster assured Gordon he would let the maids clean up. Finally, three days having turned into three months, Rooney had to put his foot down: Webster couldn't live on the Steelers' dime indefinitely. The bill had reached more than \$8,000. Gordon was dispatched to tell Webster he had to move on.

Then, with Webster's condition rapidly deteriorating, it was announced he had been elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The announcement, of course, was not unexpected; Webster was one of the greatest linemen in NFL history. But it presented an uncomfortable dilemma. Webster's struggles had become an open secret in Pittsburgh and parts of Wisconsin. As preparations for the induction ceremony unfolded, those closest to Webster wondered how he would get through it.

In early July 1997, weeks before the ceremony, ESPN aired a story that laid bare Webster's postretirement life. The story noted the loss of his home, his car, and "most of his worldly possessions." Pam was quoted saying, "As good as times got, they got bad. We've gone through times when we didn't have toilet paper, where we did not have heat in the house."

Webster said doctors believed he might have Parkinson's disease or a form of post-concussion syndrome. During a subsequent interview in which he suggested that the ESPN story had overstated his problems, Webster described visiting a doctor in Philadelphia who ran tests that revealed head and chest problems.

"Have you been in a car accident?" the doctor asked Webster. "Have you been hit lately? And how often?"

"Oh, probably about 25,000 times or so," Webster responded.

By the time Team Webster arrived in Canton for the Hall of Fame induction ceremony, the tragic tale of the fallen hero had been published across the country:

Houston Chronicle:

WEBSTER'S INDUCTION COMES AMID CHAOS

Atlanta Journal-Constitution:

HUMBLED HERO; WEBSTER FIGHTS TO OVERCOME DESPAIR

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

A LIFE OFF-CENTER

St. Petersburg Times:

A MAN OF STEEL CRUMPLES

Still other papers picked up a story from the Associated Press titled "From Super Bowls to Sleeping in Bus Stations"—a story in which Webster insisted, "I'm not as bad off as people say."

Of course, he was worse. But as humbling as it had been to see the demise play out so publicly, Sunny and Team Webster viewed the Hall of Fame induction more than anything as a business opportunity. At signings, Sunny could now eliminate the word *Future* from *Hall of*